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# The European Parliament: An Analysis of Its Evolving Role and of the June 1989 Elections

Steve Woehrel
Foreign Affairs Analyst
Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division

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# THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS EVOLVING ROLE AND OF THE JUNE 1989 ELECTIONS

## SUMMARY

On June 15 and 18, 1989, voters went to the polls in the 12 European Community (EC) member countries to choose the third popularly-elected European Parliament. While the results of the elections will have an important impact on EC policies and the domestic politics in several countries, they mark few great political shifts in Europe, aside from an unusually strong showing for Green parties in most member states.

The timing of the elections is perhaps as significant as their outcome. The Parliament may be at a crossroads in its development from a mere consultative assembly to a body having some of the attributes of national legislatures. The 1987 Single European Act, which laid out the plan to establish a single European market by 1992, also outlined a "cooperation procedure" that gives the Parliament the potential to veto or amend EC legislation in certain circumstances. Some observers believe this limited legislative power of Parliament may eventually be expanded to a full right of co-decision with the Council of Ministers and the Commission. Encouraged by its increased legislative role and improving public image, the Parliament has also been using its limited but significant budgetary and supervisory powers more assertively. But while the Parliament's powers are growing, it still lacks key powers possessed by national legislatures, including full control over the budget, the power to tax and the right to initiate legislation. The Parliament is unlikely to receive these powers in the short term because they raise the question of the national sovereignty of the member states.

The evolution of the Parliament's role in the EC is especially important because this Parliament will play an important role in establishment of a unified West European market due to be completed by the end of 1992. The implementation of the 1992 plan could have a substantial impact on U.S. trade with Western Europe. Parliament's status as a directly-elected body may make it more sensitive to protectionist pressures than other EC institutions, especially if protectionist legislation can be seen as demonstrating concern for other popular issues, including public health and the environment. American policy toward the EC will increasingly have to take into account the emergence of multiple decision centers within the Community.

In the longer term, the Parliament could play an important role in a politically integrated Western Europe. This development, if it were to occur, would obviously have a profound impact on U.S.-Western European relations. Because of the European Parliament's increasing influence over matters of interest to the United States, the Congress may see the Parliament as an increasingly valuable interlocutor in the next few years. The value of the relationship is enhanced by the institutional affinities of the two bodies.

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## INTRODUCTION

On June 15 and 18, 1989, voters went to the polls in the 12 European Community (EC) member countries to choose the third popularly-elected European Parliament. These elections are especially important because this Parliament will play an important role in establishment of a unified West European market due to be completed by the end of 1992. The implementation of the 1992 plan could have a substantial impact on U.S. trade with Western Europe and on U.S.-West European relations in general. In the long term, there is the possibility that the Parliament could play an important role in a politically integrated Western Europe. For these reasons, the Congress may see the European Parliament as an increasingly valuable interlocutor on a wide range of issues affecting U.S.-West European relations.

This paper begins with an overview of the role of the European Parliament in EC institutions. Then the results of June 1989 European elections are addressed and their implications for current EC policies are discussed. Finally, the report deals with the broader question of the likelihood of an increase in the Parliament's powers and the effect this would have on U.S.-West European relations and the Parliament's relationship with the U.S. Congress.

## BACKGROUND

The European Parliament is a unicameral body with 518 members, elected every five years by voters in the 12 EC countries. The seats are allocated by country as follows: Great Britain, West Germany, France and Italy receive 81 seats each, Spain receives 60 and The Netherlands has 25. Belgium, Portugal and Greece have 24 each. Denmark receives 16 seats, Ireland 15 and Luxembourg 6 seats.

Despite its name, the European Parliament is not quite a parliament in the conventional sense of the word. It currently has characteristics both of a true legislature and a consultative assembly. This situation is partly due to the continuing evolution of the European Parliament in EC institutions. The European Parliament has been in existence since 1952, when it was known as the Common Assembly. From 1952 to 1979 its members were members of national parliaments appointed by their governments to serve in the European Parliament. Its chief role was to advise the Commission and the Council on EC legislation. Often it functioned more as a symbol of a nascent European identity than as an equal partner with the other EC institutions.

Most observers agree that the first popular election of the European Parliament in 1979 marked a turning point in its history. The Parliament drew a new sense of legitimacy from its direct election. This encouraged it to use its modest powers more aggressively in ways that have had an important impact on the Community's development. To cite only two of the most prominent examples, the Parliament's rejection of the entire Community budget in 1980 and 1985 eventually led the EC Commission and member governments to make needed reforms in the Community's finances and budget. And the Parliament's 1984 adoption of a draft treaty for a European Union spurred the EC Commission to produce a 1985 White Paper on completing the EC internal market. In 1987, the twelve EC member governments approved the Single European Act, which set forth the 1992 single market plan outlined in the White Paper, albeit in a less ambitious way than envisioned by the Parliament. The Single European Act also gave Parliament new powers over EC legislation that, combined with the urgency imparted to European integration by the 1992 plan, has further increased Parliament's activism.

But while the European Parliament is accumulating power and gaining public respect, it should be noted that it still does not possess many of the prerogatives normally associated with a national parliament. It does not have the power to tax, does not have full control over the EC budget, nor can it initiate legislation, for example.

## POWERS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

### Legislative Powers

The main role of the Parliament in EC legislation has been to advise the Commission and the Council. The Commission is both the initiator of legislative proposals and the executor of EC laws. It is composed of 17 members, who are appointed by their governments for four year terms but are pledged to represent the Community's interest and not to receive instructions from the national governments. The Council of Ministers, on the other hand, represents the national interests and sovereignty of each country. It is composed of government ministers from each member country, and its membership changes with the issue on the agenda: agriculture ministers when farm policy is discussed, and finance ministers when taxes are discussed, for example. Its role is to make the final decision on whether Commission proposals become law; it can accept or reject proposals, but cannot amend them, except by unanimous vote.[1]

In theory, the Commission is required to ask for the Parliament's advice before the Council of Ministers can decide on proposed legislation, but only in certain key areas. These include the free movement of goods, the common agricultural policy, freedom of establishment, transport policy, environmental policy and social policy. In practice, the consultation procedure is extended to nearly all EC legislation. While the Commission is not obliged to follow the Parliament's advice, the Parliament can exert some influence by delaying a vote on proposed legislation until the Commission announces its position on each amendment suggested by the Parliament, or, if its amendments are not accepted, by sending the proposal back to committee, where it may stay for a maximum of two months.

The Single European Act of 1987 greatly strengthened Parliament's legislative powers by instituting a complex "cooperation procedure" between the Parliament and the other EC institutions. It involves two "readings" of legislative proposals dealing with the completion of the internal market, social policy, regional policy and technology policy. The first reading is identical to the consultation procedure outlined above, but instead of definitively accepting or rejecting the proposal, the Council merely adopts a tentative "common position" by a qualified majority.[2] The proposal then goes back to the

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[1] For details on the EC decision-making structure as a whole, see U.S. Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service. The European Community: Its Structure and Development, by Martin Elling. [Washington] August 31, 1988. 63 p. CRS Report 88-620 F.

[2] Since the passage of the Single European Act in 1987, the Council of Ministers decides most issues by a weighted majority voting system. 54 votes out of a total of 76 are required to pass legislation. The 76 votes are

(continued...)

Parliament for a second reading. The Parliament may accept, reject or amend the proposal by an absolute majority of all of its members (260 votes). If the Parliament rejects the proposal, the Council can override the vote only by a unanimous decision that is often difficult to achieve. The fate of amendments to the proposal depends on the Commission's stance. If the Commission accepts them, the Council may adopt them by a qualified majority. On the other hand, if the Commission rejects them, the Council may accept them only by a unanimous vote.

While this complicated procedure has expanded Parliament's influence in the EC decision-making process somewhat, it falls far short of full legislative powers. In effect, the cooperation procedure gives the Parliament substantial power only if it can ally itself with other institutions. The Parliament can veto a piece of legislation if it can secure the support of at least one member country in the Council to block the unanimous Council vote needed to override the Parliament's veto. Likewise, Parliament's amendments to legislation are most likely to make their way into law only if they are accepted by the Commission. Some observers feel that the cooperation procedure is a transitional device that may give way to a power of co-decision with the Commission and Council. The Parliament has this power in one area already; it can veto the applications of countries to join the EC and also approves and renews association agreements with non-EC countries.

## Budgetary Powers

The Parliament has limited but significant budgetary powers. It cannot control what are termed "compulsory expenditures" that directly result from the terms of the Rome Treaty that established the EC. This restriction deals chiefly with the common agricultural policy, which accounts for nearly two-thirds of the budget.[3] About one-quarter of the budget falls into the "non-compulsory" category. This grouping includes money for regional, social, energy, technology and environmental policies. Parliament may make amendments to this part of the budget by a vote of three-fifths of its members on second reading. However, it can only increase expenditures in these areas by a fixed percentage, set by the Commission according to formulas that take into account the growth rates in the member states and other factors.

In addition to the power of amendment, the Parliament may reject the entire budget by a two-thirds majority of the members present, as long as this

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[2](...continued)
distributed among the member countries in rough proportion to the size of their populations. Some issues, especially major EC appointments and institutional questions, require a unanimous vote.

[3] The size of the EC budget in 1988 was slightly under 44 billion ECUs ($51 billion). Europa Yearbook 1989. London: Europa Publications Ltd, 1989. p. 150.

two-thirds majority also amounts to a majority of all the members of the Parliament (260 votes). It has used this power three times since 1979, twice rejecting a Community budget (in 1980 and 1985) and once rejecting a supplementary budget (in 1982).

### Supervisory Powers

These powers consist mainly of the right to pose oral or written questions to members of the Commission, who are required to respond to them. While the Council is not required by the EC Treaty to reply to Parliament's questions, it has in fact consented to do so. The Commission and Council responded to over 4,000 written and oral questions asked by members of the Parliament in 1987.

The Parliament also has the power to dismiss the Commission by a vote of no confidence by a two-thirds majority of the members present, and a majority of all the members of the Parliament (260 votes). The Parliament has voted on several no-confidence motions, all defeated by overwhelming margins.

## HOW THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT WORKS

The workings of the European Parliament are similar to those of national legislatures in several respects; there are political groupings that devise legislative strategy and try to enforce discipline, committees that do most of the legislative ground work, and floor debates and votes on legislation. But there are also quite a few ways in which the Parliament differs from national bodies, many of which limit its effectiveness.

### Political Groups

While members of the European Parliament are elected as members of their national political parties in separate national elections, they are organized within the Parliament by ideologically-based political groups that cut across national differences. The establishment and strengthening of these transnational groups is encouraged by rules for committee assignments and the allocation of funds for staff support that favor large groups composed of several nationalities. In the previous Parliament, these European political "parties" have included for example a Socialist group (the largest), a Communist group, a mainly Christian Democratic group (called the European People's Party), a Liberal (free market-oriented) group, various conservative groups, a far-right group and a "Rainbow Group" composed chiefly of Greens. Each new Parliament sees some realignments in the groups, with some groups breaking up and others forming, but the groups are in general quite stable

because they represent, in a rough way, true trans-European ideological "families." [4]

Like political parties, the groups play important roles in choosing the leadership of the Parliament, making committee assignments, and setting the agenda of the full Parliament. On the other hand, these groups lack the party discipline that is customary in national parliaments. This is partly because the groupings have little control over campaign financing, designation of candidates and other tools that could be used to encourage party unity, and partly because Parliament's attitudes on many issues are still conditioned more by nationality than ideological leanings. In addition, the groups vary in ideological coherence. The Socialist and Christian Democrats (European People's Party) have perhaps the most cohesive groups, while the Communist group has broken apart because of the great differences between the moderate Italian Communists and the hard-line French party.

**The Parliament and Its Committees**

In an average month, the Parliament's work is divided into two weeks of committee meetings, one week of plenary meetings of the full Parliament and one week of political group meetings. One of the key problems the Parliament faces is that these activities do not take place in one location. The committees meet in Brussels, the full sessions of the Parliament in the French city of Strasbourg, while the Parliament's administrative Secretariat is housed in Luxembourg. (The political group meetings can be held anywhere, but are held most often in Brussels or Strasbourg.) This situation means that the Parliament must spend a considerable amount of time and expense travelling between these locations. Most members would prefer to move all activities to Brussels, where the other key EC institutions are located, but these moves have been blocked so far by the governments of France and Luxembourg.

As in Congress, the committees play a key role in the legislative process. They provide detailed reports on legislation proposed by the Commission before it goes to the floor for a vote by the Parliament as a whole. They also prepare reports on their own initiative for consideration by the Parliament. There are now 18 standing committees and a few ad hoc committees that deal with a wide assortment of issues, ranging from political affairs, the budget, and external economic relations to social policy, women's rights and civil rights. There are also parliamentary "delegations" that handle relations with other parliaments. (The largest and most prestigious of these handles relations with the United States.) Committee membership and assignments to produce

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[4] The most likely realignments in the new Parliament are a break-up of the Communist group (into an Italian-led moderate group and a French-led hard-line group) and the formation of a French and German-dominated Green group that might break away from the Rainbow group.

reports in the committee's name are parcelled out to reflect the weight of the groupings inside the Parliament.

The assignment of individual members to these duties for two and a half year terms is made by each political grouping. Chairmanships, also assigned by political groupings, are particularly important, since the chairmen, like their U.S. congressional counterparts, effectively control their committees' agenda. However, there are several other ways in which the Parliament's operation differs from that of Congress. The subcommittee system is not well-established; there are only four of them now. Informal task forces are more common than subcommittees at present. In addition, public hearings of expert testimony are still rare for European Parliamentary committees. Finally, a critical difference between Congress and the European Parliament is the lack of staff support. As in most national parliaments in Europe, each member is given funds only for two aides, including a secretary. Committee staffing is also very weak. This situation puts the Parliament in a difficult position when it tries to compete with the more generously staffed Commission and the Council.

**Plenary Sessions**

The full Parliament meets only five days each month in Strasbourg. In this time the Parliament debates, amends and votes on committee reports and various resolutions. In addition, members may also pose oral questions to Commission and Council members. A President, elected by the Parliament, presides over the sessions. He is assisted by fourteen Vice-Presidents, who are drawn from the largest political groups. The President and the Vice Presidents form a "Bureau" that deals mainly with the Parliament's administration and questions of organization. An "enlarged Bureau" that includes the leaders of the political groups prepares the agenda for the full sessions of the Parliament. This agenda is usually very long; there are usually 50 to 60 points to be addressed, each requiring at least 20 minutes of debate. In addition, six to eight hours are needed to vote on between 500 and 1,000 amendments to legislation. This means that the Parliament may have to vote on amendments at a rate of 100 per hour.[5] This situation has led to calls for setting aside more days for plenary sessions of the Parliament, preferably in Brussels, where the committees meet. The number of resolutions considered might also be reduced, especially since many of these have a mainly symbolic character.

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[5] Buchan, David. "Europe's Wandering Parliamentarians Start Down New Path," Financial Times, 2 June 1989, 4.

## THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS OF 1989

The results of the June 1989 elections above all reflected the preoccupation of voters in the 12 EC countries with national concerns, despite the fact that the European Parliament will be concerned mainly with EC issues.[6] This phenomenon, which also occurred during the 1984 election, is partly due to the way in which the Parliament is elected. The fact that members of the European Parliament are elected within each country, from slates put forth by national parties, according to national electoral laws inevitably brings national issues to the forefront during a campaign. Many observers believe that both candidates and electorate saw the election more as a referendum on current national governments' policies than a debate on sometimes rather esoteric EC issues, which in any case evince little public excitement and are often poorly understood. In many countries, the result was perceived as a mild setback to the national government.

In Great Britain and West Germany, the consequences of the vote may be more serious. In Britain, the Conservative government's decisive defeat at the hands of the Labor opposition and the breakthrough of the British Greens is attributed by some to Prime Minister Thatcher's strong opposition to further European integration. But since Labor itself is not united in wholehearted support of greater British integration into Europe, others point to the unpopularity of some Conservative policies and bickering within the government itself as explanations for Labor's victory.

In West Germany, the far-right Republican party scored a breakthrough, winning over 7 percent of the vote, ensuring it of six seats in the new European Parliament. Both the ruling Christian Democrats and the opposition SPD received disappointing tallies. Perhaps more troublesome for West German leaders than the impressive performance of the far-right Republicans is the potential fragmentation of the West German party system. The fact that there seem now to be five parties of widely varying points of view capable of winning seats in the West German parliament could make difficult the formation of a government in Bonn after the December 1990 federal elections, even with participation of "extreme" parties like the Greens and Republicans.[7]

One feature of the elections that spanned national boundaries was low voter turnout. In the 12 EC states, only 58.5% of registered votes cast a ballot, a low figure when compared with national elections in Europe and slightly less than the level of participation during the last European election

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[6] See Appendix for distribution of seats in the new Parliament by European political grouping and the election results for each member country.

[7] A possible alternative to this situation would be a "grand coalition" between the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats.

in 1984. Participation was lowest in Great Britain (36%), highest in countries having a national election at the same time as the European vote and/or where the voting is obligatory. France (48.9%) recorded a near-record low for a nation-wide election. Limited public knowledge and enthusiasm about the European Parliament's duties may be responsible for this phenomenon, which has been noted in the two previous European elections in 1979 and 1984.

Another transnational phenomenon was the strong showing of Green parties in nearly every European country. The most important gains were made by Greens in France and Britain. The French Greens captured 11% of the vote and 9 seats, while their British counterparts won 14% of the vote but no seats, due to the British "winner-take-all" electoral system. Green parties also did well in West Germany, Belgium and Italy. Some observers attributed the Greens' striking successes to the public's increased interest in environmental issues and a recognition that European institutions may be uniquely suited to addressing these problems, which cannot be solved merely on the national level. Others pointed out that voters may also have seen the election as a chance to cast a protest vote in a contest perceived as less "serious" than a national election. This would have allowed them to vote for the appealing image of the Greens, without having to endorse anti-NATO and anti-economic growth positions that might otherwise be unpopular. This protest vote explanation might also account for the substantial support for far-right parties in France, Belgium, West Germany and Italy.

As a whole, the new Parliament is slightly further to the left ideologically than the previous one. In the previous Parliament, centrist and conservative parties had a majority of about 20 seats in the 518-member body. If one places the Greens with the Socialists and Communists, the left has a theoretical majority of 260 seats. But the Greens have many differences with the traditional left (and among themselves as well) on key questions, including the desirability of economic growth and further economic and political integration. On the other hand, "the left" is likely to agree on an acceleration of Parliament's already increasing emphasis on environmental and social issues.

But while the Parliament may have seemed to move slightly more to the left, the "governing coalition", to the extent one exists, will likely be centrist. Ideologically-based majorities have been less important in the European Parliament than in national legislative bodies. Many votes, especially those having an impact on important national industrial or agricultural interests, are still decided more on national or regional lines than ideological ones that cut across nationalities. Moreover, the need to garner a minimum of 260 votes to act on legislation, despite a substantial absenteeism rate at many sessions, has encouraged a spirit of compromise among the political groups. The leaders in this process have been the largest, most centrist and pro-integration groups in the assembly: the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and the Socialists.

## THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

In the ten years since it was first popularly elected, the European Parliament has evolved from an almost purely consultative body to one having important legislative powers. It is likely for a variety of reasons that this trend will continue and may even be accelerated in the five-year term of the next Parliament. However, there are also a number of factors that may hinder this process.

### AN INCREASINGLY POWERFUL EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT?

One factor that favors an increasing role for the Parliament is the push to complete the EC internal market by the end of 1992. The 1987 Single European Act laid out the 1992 plan and gave Parliament new powers, including the "cooperation procedure" under which the Parliament can accept, reject or amend laws proposed by the Commission to implement the 1992 plan. The Parliament therefore has to act on a large body of legislation that, while often technical in nature, will have a great impact on important national interests of the member states and the lives of the 320 million people who live in the Community and on the interests of nations trading with the EC.

While the 1992 plan will increase the power of all the Community institutions vis-a-vis the member states, the Parliament can expect an especially strong boost from the so-called "democratic deficit" paradox. Despite the democratic principles of the 12 EC states, EC institutions do not function very democratically; institutions traditionally seen as closest to popular concerns, the national legislatures and the European Parliament, play only a small role in EC decision-making. The surveillance of national legislatures over the actions of government ministers participating in the EC Council of Ministers is quite lax in most countries. Moreover, the system of qualified majority voting instituted by the Single European Act means that legislation in certain areas could be passed by the Council against the wishes of a member country. Therefore, a national parliament's will can be frustrated even if it manages to impose its views on its government's ministers. Some observers believe a potential solution to the democratic deficit would be to expand the powers of the European Parliament, which devotes all its time to EC legislation and is directly elected by all the citizens of the Community.

Another factor that favors an increased role for the European Parliament in the EC is the emergence of other issues that are seen as solvable only on a transnational basis. The foremost of these are environmental concerns. The Parliament profits especially from this trend, since it has already had a highly visible impact on EC environmental legislation, including most recently a successful attempt to toughen auto emission standards in the Community. The strong representation of the Greens in the new Parliament may have an effect similar to the "greening" effect in the national politics in the member states; the new ideas put forth by the Greens may alter the debate, even if

some of their proposals may be too radical for complete acceptance by the mainstream parties.

Parliament's influence may also increase due to the recent improvement of its image. It has had a reputation in Europe as a "gravy train" offering generous pay and benefits while demanding little substantive work, a dumping ground for political "has-beens", and a talking shop with a fondness for passing resolutions in areas, especially foreign policy, where it has little power or competence. But with the new powers it has received under the Single European Act, and the urgency imparted to European integration by the 1992 plan, the Parliament and its image have begun to change. Absenteeism, a major problem that has both reduced public respect for the Parliament and hindered its effectiveness, has gone down markedly in the past year. In addition, the Parliament now devotes less time to voting on symbolic resolutions, spending about 80% of its time in committee carefully reviewing and acting on legislation. Those member countries who have taken a skeptical, wait-and-see attitude toward the Parliament's requests for more powers may be inclined to grant them to a more responsible body.

Finally, the European Parliament is shedding its reputation as a dead-end job for ambitious politicians, or at most a stepping-stone to higher posts back home. In the 1989 elections a considerable number of leading politicians ran for seats in the Parliament. In some countries where pro-EC sentiment is high (in the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy, for example), this is nothing new. But in France, for example, the election of former President Valery Giscard d'Estaing and President of the National Assembly and former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius to the Parliament is a significant event. Perhaps even more important for the Parliament's future is the increasing number of young politicians who are making their careers on the European level instead of the national one, because they believe a long-term shift is under way in decision-making away from the member states to European institutions.

All these factors have prompted many in Europe's political elite to consider the European Parliament to be the Community's institution of the future. Commission President Jacques Delors has said he would prefer to be elected to his commissioner's post by the European Parliament rather than be appointed by the member governments. West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl has said that the Parliament will have gained powers approaching those of national parliaments by the end of its term in 1994. Whether these developments occur or not, they mark a change in the debate about the European Parliament which is more conducive to an expansion of its powers.

## FACTORS HINDERING A GROWTH IN THE PARLIAMENT'S POWERS

If there are substantial reasons to expect the Parliament to play a more important role in EC institutions than at present, there are also factors that work against this evolution. Paradoxically, one may be the very dynamism

imparted to economic integration by the Single Act; the complex issues involved in implementing the 1992 plan may put institutional reform on the back burner.

Another major hurdle Parliament faces is the low level of public participation in European elections when compared to national elections. This may tend to reduce the legitimacy of the Parliament's claim to be a truly representative institution.[8] Moreover, the low turnout may be attributable to the public's ignorance of and lack of interest in an institution that is seen as having little power to affect their lives directly. The high abstention rate may be interpreted as a sign that Europeans simply do not want a stronger role for the European Parliament in EC institutions.

There are also problems relating to the Parliament's institutional practices. The most obvious one is the Parliament's three "homes": full sessions in Strasbourg, committee meetings in Brussels and staff in Luxembourg. This arrangement hinders the Parliament's effectiveness and diminishes its credibility. The Parliament also lacks cohesion. The Parliament's eight transnational "parties" are not as ideologically cohesive and disciplined as traditional national parties. There are 84 national parties represented in the new Parliament, several more than in the previous one. There are divisions along national and regional lines, as well as varying degrees of enthusiasm for the process of European integration. A careful search for consensus has therefore been necessary for the Parliament to be effective. In the last Parliament, the presence of Germans at the head of both the Christian Democratic and Socialist groups, the two largest pro-integration groups in the Parliament, made this quest easier. This will not be the case in the new Parliament. Moreover, the expansion in importance of the Greens and the far right in the Parliament, groups more attuned to protest than compromise, may pose additional problems.

In addition, the issues the new Parliament will face may be more divisive than those faced by previous Parliaments because of their importance for national interests as a result of the 1992 plan. They may also be more prone to left/right ideological disputes, especially those dealing with the construction of a "social Europe." But this clash of ideas and interests may not be entirely harmful; if it leads to greater ideological group cohesion, a more confrontational atmosphere might eventually make the Parliament more akin to national parliaments.

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[8] European observers have pointed out that the turnout (58.5%), while low by the standards of national parliamentary elections in Europe, compares favorably to elections in the United States, even during Presidential elections years. In the Presidential election of 1988, 50.2% of the eligible voting age population cast ballots, while in 1986 the turnout was only 33.4%. See U.S. Department of Commerce, Statistical Abstract of the United States. Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1989. p. 258.

A final obstacle to an increase in the Parliament's powers is the lack of consensus among member governments on the issue. For example, while the Italians and the Benelux countries are generally sympathetic to an expansion of Parliament's powers, the French and the Germans are less enthusiastic, while Denmark and Great Britain are frankly opposed. The most significant opposition is posed by Great Britain. In the European Parliament election campaign, Prime Minister Thatcher made clear her strong opposition to reducing British national sovereignty in favor of greater European integration.

## LIKELY CHANGES IN THE PARLIAMENT'S POWERS

While the Parliament will probably increase in power in general terms both during its current five year mandate and in the longer term, the various avenues for this change differ markedly in their likelihood. In the short term (i.e. the next five years) any major changes in the statutory powers of the Parliament are unlikely. The odds of sweeping changes in the longer term are harder to predict, since they depend on future developments that are themselves uncertain: the perceived success or failure of the 1992 plan, the degree to which the populations of EC member countries will see themselves as "European" as much as or more than they see themselves as French, Greek, British, etc., and the performance of the newly elected Parliament with the powers it has already. Any changes would also require amendment of the EC Treaty by unanimous consent of all the member states. Therefore, the current strong objections of several member states (especially Great Britain) to an extension of the Parliament's powers would have to be overcome.

The best opportunity for the Parliament to expand its formal powers is when amendments are made to the Treaty in the early to mid-1990's to implement a plan for monetary union, since the 12 EC member states are unlikely to go to the trouble of opening the Treaty to amendments solely for the Parliament's benefit. Supporters of increased power for the Parliament could point out that monetary union, implemented without an increase in the Parliament's power, may sharpen the "democratic deficit" since control over national monetary and perhaps to a degree fiscal policies would shift to Brussels. The powers the 12 member states are likely to grant Parliament do not include the most important powers of national legislatures that impinge most directly on national sovereignty, because of the reluctance of most member governments to permit a radical devolution of power to a supranational body. Examples of these powers are the right to levy taxes and full power over the budget and over a European foreign policy. A power to initiate EC legislation (depending of course on what sort of legislation the Parliament is permitted to originate) may be less injurious to national sovereignty and could be therefore somewhat more likely in the long term. Most likely would be a full power of co-decision over EC legislation, because the present cooperation procedure is widely seen as a transitional half-measure and because the Parliament already possesses this power in two areas: the admission of new members to the Community and the signing of association agreements with non-EC countries.

A more likely scenario for the next five years would be a Parliament that receives no new statutory powers, but increases its de facto influence by EC Court of Justice rulings that would interpret the Parliament's powers under the existing treaty in a more liberal manner. While the EC Court has generally been cautious in this regard, at least one recent ruling may mark a tendency in this direction; the Court ruled that the Parliament as a whole could meet in extraordinary session in Brussels instead of Strasbourg. If the Parliament could move all its work to Brussels (over French and Luxembourgian objections) its effectiveness would be considerably increased.

Parliament's role in EC institutions is likely to increase simply because it will probably continue to use its current powers more assertively. Indeed, this has happened already; the Commission consults with Parliament when it is formulating its proposals in order to prevent a surprise delay or even rejection of legislation at later stages. It accepts many of Parliament's amendments at later stages for the same reason. The Parliament could also conceivably use its powers to hold up legislation that the Commission would like to see passed quickly in order to secure an informal agreement with the Commission on procedures that would increase its role in the legislative process. Finally, the Parliament is likely to gain respect for its investigative work. As Parliament's confidence and its workload increase its committee structure may become more elaborate and greater use may be made of outside experts and open hearings. Perhaps the most crucial issue is staffing. If the Parliament's operating budget is increased more member and committee staff would be available to examine legislation and do in-depth studies of issues of interest to the Parliament.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

The push in Western Europe toward greater economic integration as embodied in the 1992 plan may have an important impact on U.S. political and economic interests in the region. While the EC's external economic relations are managed by the Commission, the Parliament has an important role in the implementation of the 1992 plan that is likely to increase in its coming five-year term. Parliament's influence will be felt especially in areas such as product standards, domestic content rules and other EC legislation that could conceivably be used to build a feared "Fortress Europe."[9]

Moreover, if Parliament becomes an increasingly popular (and populist) institution, it may be more inclined to protectionism, especially if it can seen as responding to concern for consumer-oriented issues, for example the environment and public health. The recent beef hormones dispute may be an indication of things to come.[10] On the other hand, it can be argued that a populist, consumer-oriented Parliament may be more open to low-cost imports and that it would therefore oppose barriers. In any case, the United States will have to deal with multiple decision centers in attempts to influence EC policy. This fact is already reflected in the increasing number of American law firms and corporate lobbyists who try to influence the European Parliament, especially during its committee meetings in Brussels.

In the longer term, United States political and security interests are likely to be increasingly involved as well, for moves toward economic integration create pressures for further political integration to manage the changes. In addition, the need for economic reform in Eastern Europe will lead to a greater foreign policy role for the EC. Parliament's role in these areas is limited at present, and will probably remain so for its current five-year term, because they are at the heart of the touchy issues of national sovereignty.

Parliament's most visible foreign policy powers at present are its veto power over new applications to join the Community and over the establishment and renewal of association agreements with non-Community countries. The question of enlarging the EC beyond its present membership of 12 will probably be put off until 1993 at the earliest, so that the current membership can absorb the changes already underway. The power to veto association agreements is a power the Parliament can use more frequently. This power is sometimes used in ways that are in line with U.S. policy,

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[9] See U.S. Congress. Congressional Research Service. European Community: Issues Raised by 1992 Integration, coordinated by Glennon Harrison. [Washington] May 31, 1989. CRS Report 89-323 E.

[10] See U.S. Congress. Congressional Research Service. U.S.-Community Trade Dispute over Meat Containing Growth Hormones, by Donna Vogt. [Washington] January 3, 1989. 12p. CRS 89-8.

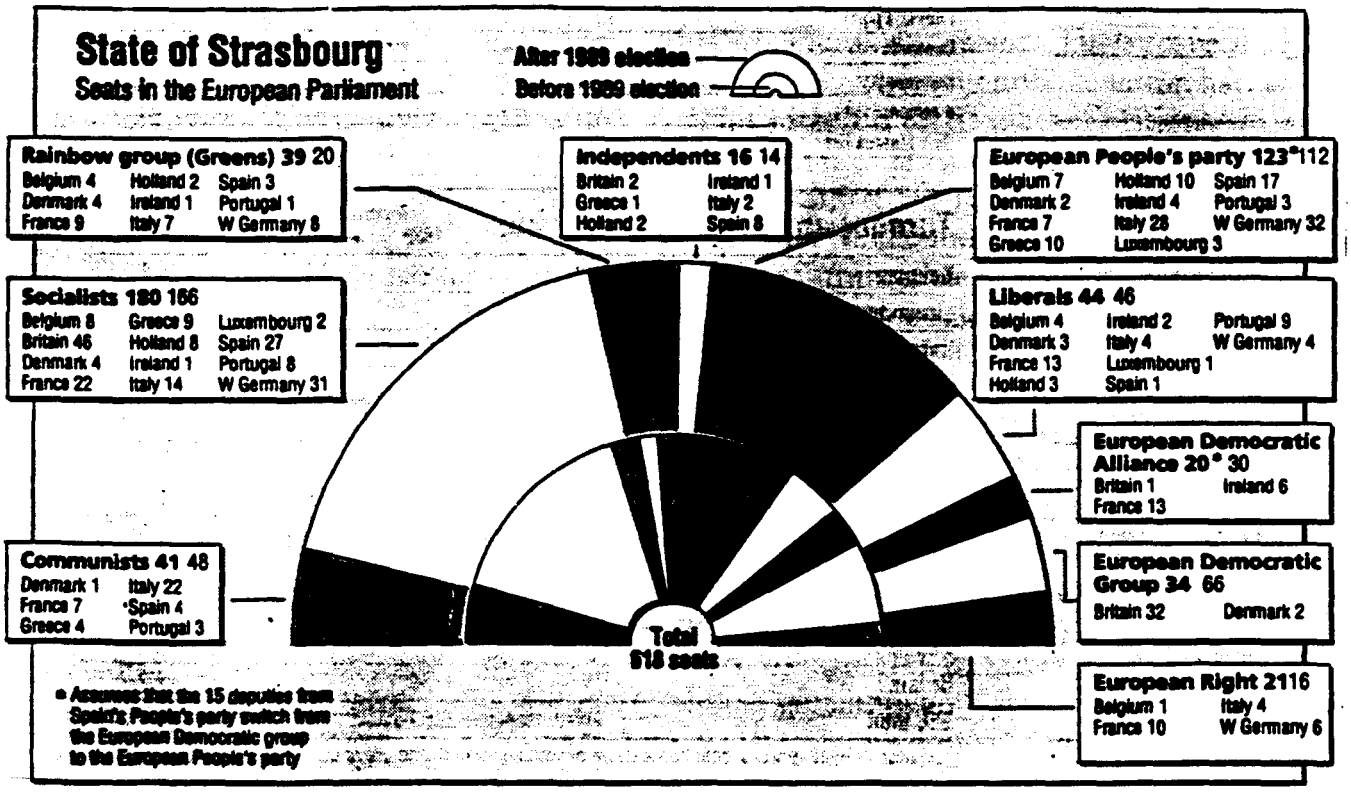
sometimes in ways that conflict with it. An example of the latter was the rejection at first of a 1987 association agreement with Israel because of Israeli policy in the occupied territories. The Parliament's foreign relations role includes the right to pose questions to the presidency of the European Political Cooperation, an intergovernmental consultative framework that attempts to build a European consensus on foreign policy issues. The Parliament also passes foreign policy resolutions, with special emphasis on human rights issues, and its Political Committee prepares comprehensive reports on European security questions. However, a true power of control for the Parliament over a European foreign policy seems at best a long-range possibility, since it would have to take place within the context of a politically integrated Europe.

## CONGRESS AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

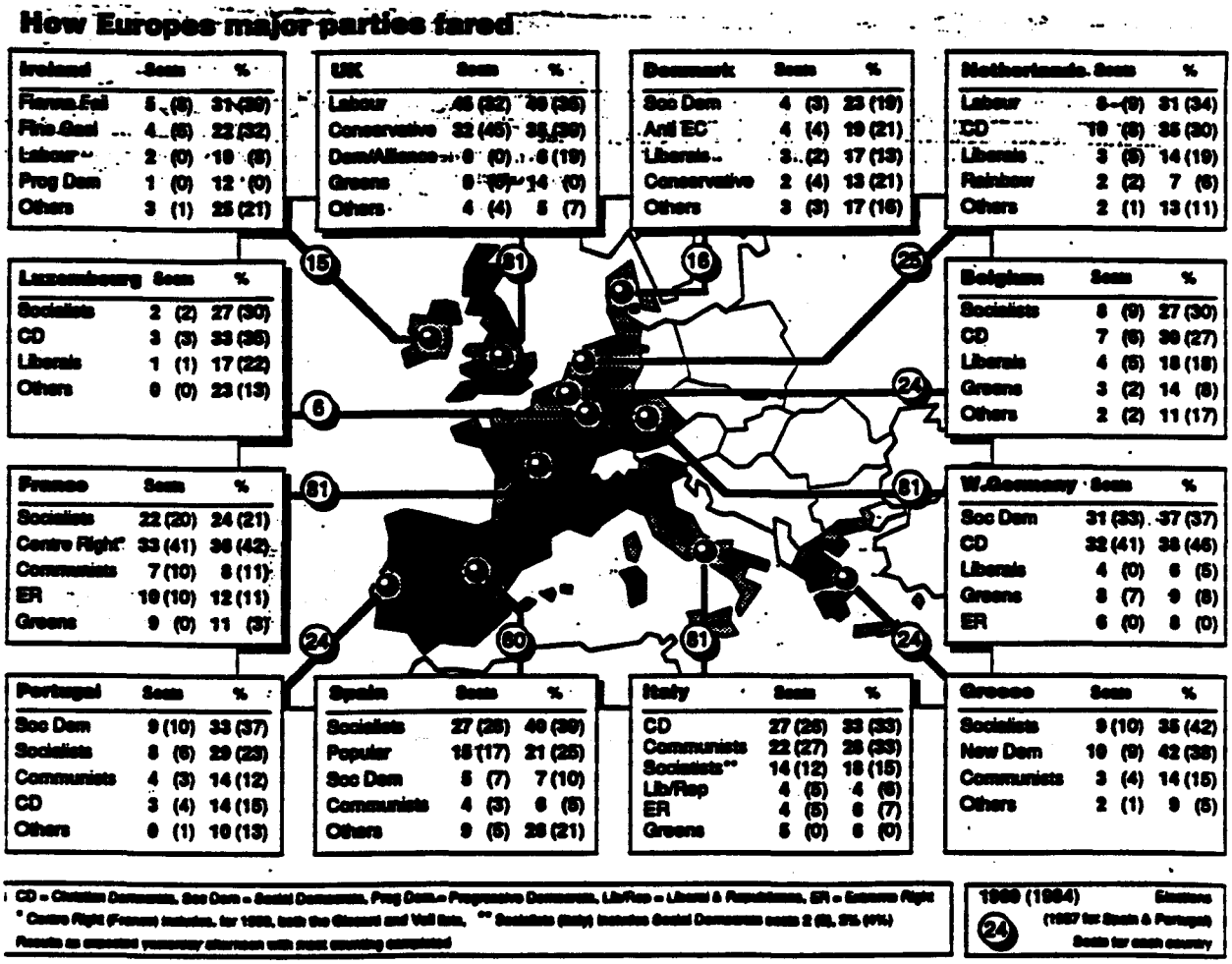
Congress's direct contacts with the European Parliament are quite limited at present; Members of Congress and the European Parliament meet twice a year, once in Europe and once in the United States. Members of Congress participating in these meetings have found them to be useful as a forum for an exchange of views on a wide variety of subjects, including trade, environmental, foreign policy and defense issues. While the powers of the European Parliament will remain considerably weaker than those of the U.S. Congress for the foreseeable future, the Parliament already has a substantial impact on EC policies that interest Congress including the 1992 plan and the environment. But even if the Parliament's role in the EC were to remain limited in other areas, the influence these men and women have through their expertise and the personal connections they possess in their home countries and internationally make them valuable interlocutors for Members of Congress. Moreover, their status as directly elected representatives of Europeans may give Congress an especially good insight into European public opinion.

In the longer term, if power in the Community shifts from the Commission and the Council to the Parliament and from the member states to the EC as a whole, these ties would be even more valuable. Congress could build on its institutional affinities with the Parliament to strengthen a natural line of communication independent of the executive branch with an important policy making body that increasingly deal with issues that are very important to U.S. interests.

APPENDIX




Source: The Economist, June 24, 1989, p. 45.




Source: Financial Times, June 20, 1989, p. 6.